Lessons from the Third Wave of the ~~North American~~ Anarchist Black Cross Movement

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Continuity of Struggle

"Any movement which does not support its political internees is a sham movement."
—Ojore Lutalo, co-founder of the Anarchist Black Cross Federation

The following four texts are compiled in pamphlet form to provide the reader with a historical grounding for present-day discussions on organized support for political prisoners and prisoners of war from social movements against U.S. settler-colonial land occupation, population displacement and (domestic and international) warfare.

The first text is an excerpt from the book *Anarchism and the Black Revolution,* first published in 1979 by Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin in prison. This excerpt outlines some key differences in organizational perspective between anarchists and the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tradition, offering concrete alternatives to centralized and hierarchical models of prisoner support.

The second text, also written by Ervin while in prison, was crucial for inspiring the creation of a third wave of the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) in the U.S. context during the early 1990s, including both the ABC Federation in 1995 and the ABC Network in 2002. In it, Ervin proposes a wide range of principles and initiatives which have never fully been realized to this day. Notably, he envisions a network that engages in both defensive and offensive functions, prefiguring contemporary discussions around strategies of anti-repression vs. counter-repression.

The third piece is written by the Claustrophobia Collective, a Baltimore chapter that broke from the ABC Federation in the mid-1990s. The critiques it raises regarding the power dynamics of the ABC and anarchist prisoner support more broadly are as relevant today as they were then. In particular, we want to highlight their distinction between *material and technical support* and *political support* of prisoners, and the way that focusing on the former at the expense of the latter can lead to what they call a "parasitic" relationship between outside prisoner support groups and prison revolutionaries on the inside.

The last text is a statement delivered by Ervin to the Anarchist Black Cross Network in 2002 that directly calls on us to generalize prisoner support into a *mass movement* rooted in a multiracial, grassroots base—in other words, to turn the prisoner "support" movement into a genuinely revolutionary movement. We think there is much that North American anarchists can learn from Ervin's as-yet unrealized vision, especially when considered alongside the Palestinian national liberation movement, whose success has largely hinged on *coordinated struggle between prisoners and outside militants*.

One of our main purposes in presenting these texts together is to show the often-overlooked continuities between the Black Radical Tradition and the contemporary abolitionist and anarchist prisoner support movements—a continuity we feel has been obscured for a variety of reasons, including the emergence of the nonprofit industrial complex and professionalized activism. While Anarchist Black Cross formations have gone through many different iterations over the decades, each attempt to reframe their purpose and organizing principles has been galvanized by internal critiques from Black radical movements.

The importance of seeing the Black Radical Tradition as the basis of contemporary abolitionism is its framing of prisons as tools of domestic warfare, internal colonialism, and Black genocide. Keeping this perspective front and center is important in our contemporary moment, where prisoner support work too often becomes siloed into the model of "single issue" activism, instead of a broad-based movement that highlights how all struggles against social power in the U.S. intersect at the site of the prison regime.

Anarchist vs. Marxist-Leninist Thought on the Organization of Society

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin
1979

Historically, there have been three major forms of socialism: Libertarian Socialism (Anarchism), Authoritarian Socialism (Marxist Communism), and Democratic Socialism (electoral social democracy). The non-Anarchist left has echoed the bourgeoisie's portrayal of Anarchism as an ideology of chaos and lunacy. But Anarchism and especially Anarchist-Communism has nothing in common with this image. It is false and made up by its ideological opponents, the Marxist-Leninists.

It is very difficult for the Marxist-Leninists to make an objective criticism of Anarchism as such, because by its nature it undermines all the suppositions basic to Marxism. If Marxism and Leninism—its variant which emerged during the Russian revolution—is held out to be a working class philosophy, and believes that the proletariat cannot owe its emancipation to anyone but itself, it is hard to go back on it and say that the working class is not yet ready to dispense with authority over it.

Lenin came up with the idea of a transitional state, which would "wither away" over time, to go along with Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat." The Anarchists expose this line as counter-revolutionary and sheer power-grabbing. Over 75 years of Marxist-Leninist practice has proven us right. These so-called "socialist states" produced by Marxist-Leninist doctrine have only produced Stalinist police states where workers have no rights, a new ruling class of technocrats and party politicians have emerged, and the class differential between those the state favored over those it didn't created widespread deprivation among the masses and another class struggle.

But instead of meeting such criticisms head-on, [the Marxist-Leninists] have concentrated their attacks not on the doctrine of Anarchism, but on particular Anarchist historical figures, especially Bakunin, an ideological opponent of Marx in the First International of socialist movements in the last century.

Anarchists are socialist revolutionaries who seek a stateless, classless, voluntary, cooperative federation of decentralized communes based upon social ownership, individual liberty and autonomous self-management of social and economic life.

The Anarchists differ from the Marxists-Leninists in many areas, but especially in organization-building. They differ from the authoritarian socialists in primarily three ways: they reject the Marxist-Leninist notions of the "vanguard party," "democratic centralism," and the "dictatorship of the proletariat," and Anarchists have alternatives to each of them. The problem is that almost the entire left (including some Anarchists) is completely unaware of Anarchism's tangible structural alternatives of the Catalyst Group, Anarchist Consensus, and the Mass Commune.

The Anarchist alternative to the vanguard party is the catalyst group. The catalyst group is merely an Anarchist-Communist federation of affinity groups in action. This Catalyst group or revolutionary anarchist federation would meet on a regular basis or only when there was a necessity, depending on the wishes of the membership and the urgency of social conditions. It would be made up of representatives from or the affinity group itself, with full voting rights, privileges, and responsibilities. It would set both policies and future actions to be performed. It will produce both Anarchist-Communist theory and social practice. It believes in the class struggle and the necessity to overthrow Capitalist rule. It organizes in the communities and workplaces. It is democratic and has no authority figures like a party boss or central committee.

In order to make a revolution large-scale, coordinated movements are necessary, and their formation is in no way counter to Anarchism. What Anarchists are opposed to is hierarchical, power-tripping leadership which suppresses the creative urge of the bulk of those involved, and forces an agenda down their throats. Members of such groups are mere servants and worshippers of the party leadership. But although Anarchists reject this type of domineering leadership, they do recognize that some people are more experienced, articulate, or skilled than others, and these people will play leadership action roles. These persons are not authority figures, and can be removed at the will of the body. There is also a conscious attempt to routinely rotate this responsibility and to pass on these skills to each other, especially to women and people of color, who would ordinarily not get the chance.

The experiences of these persons, who are usually veteran activists or better qualified than most at the moment can help form and drive forward movements, and even help crystallize the potential for revolutionary change in the popular movement. What they cannot do is take over the initiative of the movement itself. The members of these groups reject hierarchical positions — anybody having more 'official' authority than others — and unlike the M-L vanguard parties, the Anarchist groups won't be allowed to perpetuate their leadership through a dictatorship after the revolution. Instead, the catalyst group itself will be dissolved and its members, when they are ready, will be absorbed into the new society's collective decision-making process Therefore these Anarchists are not leaders, but merely advisors and organizers for a mass movement.

What we don't want or need is a group of authoritarians leading the working class, and then establishing themselves as a centralized decision-making command, instead of "withering away"; Marxist-Leninist states have perpetuated authoritarian institutions (the secret police, labor bosses, and the communist party) to maintain their power. The apparent effectiveness of such organizations (we 're just as efficient as the Capitalists) masks the way that "revolutionaries" who pattern themselves after Capitalist institutions become absorbed by bourgeois values, and completely isolated from the real needs and desires of ordinary people.

The reluctance of Marxist-Leninists to accept revolutionary social change is, however, above all seen in Lenin's conception of the party. It is a prescription to nakedly seize power and put it in the hands of the Communist Party. The party that Leninists create today, they believe, should become the (only) "Party of the Proletariat" in which that class could organize and seize power. In practice, however, this meant personal and party dictatorship, which they felt gave them the right and duty to wipe out all other parties and political ideologies. Both Lenin and Stalin killed millions of workers and peasants, their left-wing ideological opponents, and even members of the Bolshevik party. This bloody and treacherous history is why there is so much rivalry and hostility between Marxist-Leninist and Trotskyite parties today, and it is why the "workers' states," whether in Cuba, China, Vietnam, or Korea, are such oppressive bureaucracies over their people. It is also why most of the Eastern European Stalinist countries had their governments overthrown by the petty bourgeois and ordinary citizens in the 1980s. Maybe we are witnessing the eclipse of State communism entirely, since they have nothing new to say and will never get those governments back again.

While Anarchist groups reach decisions through Anarchist consensus, the Marxist-Leninists organize through so-called democratic centralism. Democratic centralism poses as a form of inner party democracy, but is really just a hierarchy by which each member of a party — ultimately of a society — is subordinate to a "higher" member until one reaches the all-powerful party central committee and its Chairman. This is a totally undemocratic procedure, which puts the leadership above criticism, even if it isn't above reproach. It is a bankrupt, corrupt method of internal operations for a political organization. You have no voice in such a party, and must be afraid to say any unflattering comments to or about the leaders.

In Anarchist groups, proposals are talked out by members (none of whom has authority over another), dissenting minorities are respected, and each individual's participation is voluntary. Everyone has the right to agree or disagree over policy and actions, and everyone's ideas are given equal weight and consideration. No decision may be made until each individual member or affiliated group that will be affected by that decision has had a chance to express their opinion on the issue. Individual members and affiliated groups shall retain the option to refuse support to specific federation activities, but may not actively obstruct such activities. In true democratic fashion, decisions for the federation as a whole must be made by a majority of its members.

In most cases, there is no real need for formal meetings for the making of decisions. What is needed is coordination of the actions of the group. Of course, there are times when a decision has to be made, and sometimes very quickly. This will be rare, but sometimes it is unavoidable. The consensus, in that case, would then have to be among a much smaller circle than the general membership of hundreds or thousands. But ordinarily all that is needed is an exchange of information and trust among parties, and a decision reaffirming the original decision will be reached, if an emergency decision had to be made. Of course, during the discussion, there will be an endeavor to clarify any major differences and explore alternative courses of action. And there will be an attempt to arrive at a mutually agreed upon consensus between conflicting views. As always, if there should be an impasse or dissatisfaction with the consensus, a vote would be taken and with a 2/3 majority, the matter would be accepted, rejected or rescinded.

This is all totally contrary to the practice of Marxist-Leninist parties where the Central Committee unilaterally sets policy for the entire organization, and arbitrary authority reigns. Anarchists reject centralization of authority and the concept of a Central Committee. All groups are free associations formed out of committees not revolutionaries disciplined by fear of authority. When the size of the work-groups (which could be framed around Labor, fundraising, anti-racism, women's rights, food and housing, et.) becomes cumbersome, the organizations can be decentralized into two or several more autonomous organizations, still united in one large federation. This enables the group to expand limitlessly while maintaining its anarchic form of decentralized self-management. It is sort of like the scientific theory of a biological cell, dividing and redividing, but in a political sense.

However, Anarchist groups aren't even necessarily organized loosely. Anarchism is flexible and structure can be practically nonexistent or very tight, depending upon the type of organization demanded by the social conditions being faced. For instance, organization would tighten during military operations or heightened political repression.

Anarchist-Communists reject the Marxist-Leninist concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and a so-called "workers' state" in favor of the mass commune. Unlike members of Leninist parties, whose daily lives are generally similar to present bourgeois lifestyles, Anarchist organizational structures and lifestyles, through communal living arrangements, urban tribes, affinity groups, squatting, etc., attempt to reflect the liberated society of the future. Anarchists built all kinds of communes and collectives during the Spanish Revolution of the 1930s, but were crushed by the fascists and the Communists. Since the Marxist-Leninists don't build cooperative structures, the nucleus of the new society, they can only see the world in bourgeois political terms. They just want to seize State power and institute their own dictatorship over the people and the workers, instead of crushing State power and replacing it with a free, cooperative society.

Of course, the party, they insist, represents the proletariat, and there is no need for them to organize themselves outside of the party. Yet even in the former Soviet Union, the Communist Party membership only represented five percent of the population. This is elitism of the worst sort and even makes the Capitalist parties look democratic by comparison. What the Communist Party was intended to represent in terms of workers' power is never made clear, but in true 1984 "doublethink" fashion, the results are 75 years of political repression and State slavery, instead of

an era of "glorious Communist rule." They must be held accountable politically for these crimes against the people, and revolutionary political theory and practice. They have slandered the names of Socialism and Communism.

We reject the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is unbridled oppression, and the Marxist-Leninists and Stalinists must be made to answer for it. Millions have been murdered by Stalin in the name of fighting an internal class war, and millions more were murdered in China, Poland, Afghanistan, Cambodia, and other countries by Communist movements which followed Stalin's prescription for revolutionary terror. We reject State communism as the worst aberration and tyranny. We can do better than this with the mass commune.

The Anarchist mass commune (sometimes also called a Workers' Council, although there are some differences) is a national continental or transnational federation of economic and political cooperatives and regional communal formations. Anarchists look to a world and a society in which real decision-making involves everyone who lives in it — a mass commune — not a few discipline freaks pulling the strings in a so-called "proletarian dictatorship." Any and all dictatorship is bad, it has no redeeming social features, yet that is what the Leninists tell us will protect us from counter-revolution.

While Marxist-Leninists claim that this dictatorship is necessary in order to crush any bourgeois counter-revolutions led by the Capitalist class or right- wing reactionaries, Anarchists feel that this is itself part of the Stalinist school of falsification. A centralized apparatus, such as a state, is a much easier target for opponents of the revolution than is an array of decentralized communes. And these communes would remain armed and prepared to defend the revolution against anyone who militarily moves against it. The key is to mobilize the people into defense guards, militias and other military preparedness units.

This position by the Leninists of the necessity for a dictatorship to protect the revolution was not proven in the Civil War which followed the Russian revolution; in fact without support of the Anarchists and other left-wing forces, along with the Russian people, the Bolshevik government would have been defeated. And then, in true dictatorship form, it turned around and wiped out the Russian and Ukrainian Anarchist movements, along with their left-wing opponents like the Mensheviks and Social revolutionaries. Even ideological opponents in the Bolshevik party were imprisoned and put to death. Lenin and Trotsky killed millions of Russian citizens right after the Civil War, when they were consolidating State power, which preceded Stalin's bloody rule. The lesson is that we should not be tricked into surrendering the grassroots people's power to dictators who pose as our friends or leaders.

We don't need the Marxist-Leninists' solutions. They are dangerous and deluding. There is another way, but, to much of the left and to many ordinary people, the choice has appeared to be Anarchic "chaos" or the Maoist "Communist" parties, however dogmatic and dictatorial. This is primarily the result of misunderstanding and propaganda. But Anarchism as an ideology provides feasible organizational structures, as well as valid alternative revolutionary theory, which, if utilized, could be the basis for organizations that are just as solid as the Marxist-Leninists' (or even more so). Only these organizations will be egalitarian and really for the benefit of people, rather than for the Communist leaders.

Anarchism is not confined to the ideas of a single theoretician, and it allows individual creativity to develop in collective groupings, instead of the characteristic dogmatism of the Marxist-Leninists. Therefore, not being cultist, it encourages a great deal of innovation and experimentation, prompting its adherents to respond realistically to contemporary conditions. It is the concept of making ideology fit the demands of life, rather than trying to make life fit the demands of ideology.

Therefore, Anarchists build organizations in order to build a new world, not to perpetuate our domination over the masses of people. We must build an organized, coordinated international

movement aimed at transforming the globe into a mass commune. Such would really be a great leap in human evolution and a gigantic revolutionary stride. It would change the world as we know it and end the special problems long plaguing humankind. It would be a new era of freedom and fulfillment.

Lets get on with it, we've got a world to win!

A Draft Proposal for an Anarchist Black Cross Network

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin
1993

Preface to the Second Edition

This pamphlet is dedicated to all those suffering in the dungeons of North America and all those revolutionaries who have lost their lives in prison anywhere in the world. I first wrote it in 1979 in hopes that it would raise the issue of political prisoners and lead to the building of a prison support movement which could save those prisoners who followed me into the prisons of North America from a fate of living death like I suffered (15 years in jail), or from a violent death like comrade George Jackson, the Attica prisoners, scores of whom were murdered by State pigs at the orders of billionaire Governor John D. Rockefeller during the revolt at that camp in 1971; Black revolutionary Andaliwa Clark who was killed in New Jersey during an escape attempt; or the brutal assassination of Anarchist political prisoner Carl Harp, founder of the Anarchist Black Dragon Collective in Washington State prison, who was killed in 1981.

Ojore N. Lutalo, who describes himself as a New African Anarchist political prisoner, and is confined at the New Jersey State penitentiary in Trenton, has been quoted as saying that "any movement that does not support its political internees is a sham movement." I obviously agree with this, and it is clear that we must turn the Anarchist Black Cross into a united mass movement, instead of just a number of isolated collectives who want to help particular prisoners. As one who went through this process myself, as a political prisoner (1969–1983), I know first hand that this piecemeal support structure will not work. What also will not work is sectarian support, and by that I mean not working with others because of ideology or refusing to support prisoners because of ideology. This is the antithesis of class war defense, and is really sellout opportunism. We must work with all those who believe in the democratic principle of class war defense, regardless of political disagreement.

Our objective is to build a mass movement strong enough to free all political prisoners, and to raze the prisons to the ground. Prisoners like Ojore rate as our highest priority. We can and must free these prisoners, those imprisoned or tortured because of political beliefs or revolutionary activity. And if we had a strong movement we could free them today! This was proven in the case of the Anarchist prisoner Martin Sostre. He was framed and imprisoned in the 1960s, and was freed because of a mass movement made up of all kinds of radicals, prison supporters and others persons of conscience.

Not all can be freed by mass movements, but most can. We must also recognize that some will have to be freed through military action. The state simply has sworn not to release some persons while they still live because they represent such a threat to state security. George Jackson was obviously one such person, but there are others still alive and in the dungeon. The Anarchist and other radical movements in North America must build an underground struggle capable of taking action like the freeing of Assata Shakur in the late 1970s, and getting those persons to safe haven. It is not easy to do this, but it must be done. Prisoners must appreciate the difficulty involved in taking such military actions, while the comrades outside must appreciate the dire threat to life of those still left inside. This is not an easy issue; it a matter of life and death on both ends of the spectrum. Such a movement cannot be built overnight, but the problem is that we are no closer to it now than when I was in prison, asking the same question this group of internees have asked themselves many times: *have they forgotten about me? Must I fight this battle alone?* This should not be the case, but it is. Here is the deal for all to see: if our revolutionary movements outside are weak, then we cannot build a movement capable enough to free prisoners or fight for

social change.

An Introduction

The Anarchist Black Cross is an international network of autonomous groups of anarchists who work to ensure that Anarchist, class war, and other prisoners aren't forgotten.

The Anarchist Red Cross was started in Tsarist Russia to organize aid for political prisoners captured by the police, and to organize self-defense against political raids by the Cossack Army. During the Russian civil war, they changed the name to the Black Cross in order to avoid confusion with the Red Cross who were organizing relief in the country. After the Bolsheviks seized power, the Anarchist movement moved the ABC offices to Berlin and continued to aid prisoners of the new regime, as well as victims of Italian fascism and others. The Black Cross fell apart during the 1930s depression due to the incredible demand for its services and a decline in financial aid. But in the late 1960s, the organization resurfaced in Britain, where it first worked to aid prisoners of the Spanish resistance, which had not in fact died after the Civil War and were fighting the dictator Franco's police. Now it has expanded and works in several areas, with contacts and other Black Cross groups in many countries around the world. The North American section started in the early 1980s.

The ABC hopes to bring attention to the plight of all prisoners including psychiatric prisoners, with an emphasis on Anarchist and class war prisoners; and, through contact with and information about Anarchist prisoners, inspire an Anarchist resistance and support movement on the outside. Although we aren't able (except with a few exceptions) to send regular financial aid to our comrades in prison, we do keep in regular contact with as many prisoners as possible, make visits and do whatever we can to prevent prisoners from becoming isolated. We fundraise on behalf of prisoners or defense committees in need of funds for legal cases or otherwise, and organize demonstrations of solidarity with imprisoned Anarchists and other prisoners.

We believe, as most Anarchists do, that prisons serve no useful function (except for the benefit of the ruling classes) and should be abolished along with the State. We differ from liberal prison reformists and groups like Amnesty International in two main ways: firstly, we believe in the abolition of both the prison system and the society which creates it, and we initiate all our actions with that in mind; secondly, we believe in direct resistance to achieve a stateless and classless society. Groups like Amnesty International balk at supporting anyone accused of so-called violent acts, thus insinuating that anyone who resists oppression and takes up arms in self-defense, or during a revolutionary insurrection, is not worthy of support. The message is clear: do not resist. Our message is exactly the opposite, and this is what we work to support. We share a commitment to revolutionary Anarchism as opposed to liberalism and individualism or legalism.

Outside of prison work, the ABC's are committed to the wider resistance in which many of these prisoners are engaged. We see a real need for Anarchists to be militantly organized if we are to effectively meet the organized repression of the State and avoid defeat. What is also needed is commitment to revolutionary politics. We see the setting up of Anarchist defense organizations, such as the ABC, as a necessary part of the growth and development of an Anarchist resistance movement, not divorcing ourselves from the revolutionary struggle and then just fighting for prison reform.

As Anarchists we believe in the promotion of direct action and collective organization in the workplace, the schools, the community and the streets, as a means of regaining power over our own lives and creating a society based on mutual aid and cooperation.

Raze the prisons, free the prisoners!

Purpose of the Movement

The stated purpose of the Anarchist Black Cross Network is to actively assist prisoners in their fight to obtain their civil and human rights, and to aid them in their struggle against the State/Class penal and judicial system. The prison system is the armed fist of the State, and is a system for State slavery. It is not really for "criminals" or other "social deviants," and it does not exist for the "protection of society."

It is for State social control and political repression. Thus it must be opposed at every turn and ultimately destroyed altogether. The abolition of prisons, the system of Laws, and the Capitalist State is the ultimate objective of every true Anarchist, yet there seems to be no clear agreement by the Anarchist movement to put active effort into that anti-authoritarian desire. We must organize our resources to support all political/class war prisoners if we truly wish to be their ally, and we must give something more than lip service.

Organizing against the enemy legal and penal system is both offensive and defensive. It is carried on with individuals, groups, and among the masses in the community. We must inform the people on a large scale of the atrocities and inhumanity of the prisons, the righteousness of our struggle, and the necessity of their full and support. We must organize our communities to attack the prison system as a moral and social abomination, and we must fight to free all political/class war prisoners.

Defensive work involves meeting the needs of the prisoners, whether those needs stem from the daily oppression of the prisons, police, courts, or the intensive repression by State/Class authorities of prison organizers. The prison support group meets these needs in two primary ways:

1. By educating the community about the class/racist nature of the prisons and the legal system and how to fight against it

2. By forming outside support groups on a local and national basis in order to ensure prisoners' defense and survival from enemy attack and from inhuman prison conditions. There should be Anarchist Black Cross Groups all over the continent.

Offensive work means directly challenging the existence of prisons and this work also involves actively campaigning against prison conditions, and propagandizing the actual cases of political/class war prisoners (i.e. prisoners jailed for specific political reasons and those who have become politically aware of the reasons for their oppression while in prison, as well as victims of frame-ups) to the largest possible audience. We must do this in order to expose, embarrass, isolate, confuse and demoralize the enemy's legal and penal system, and also to win community people over to support prisoners' struggles.

Some of our protest activities include this 15-point program:

1. Organizing Political Prisoner Defense Committees on behalf of prisoners framed or railroaded through the Capitalist courts for their political and social beliefs or prison organizing. For a prisoner in the hands of the State on political frame-up charges, the Defense Committee is the most effective instrument to fight for their freedom!

2. Holding protest rallies, marches and street demonstrations in support of prisoners' rights and against the repressive actions of State/Class authorities. Such protests can be held in and around prisons, Departments of "Corrections," Courthouses (where political prisoners'

cases are being tried or prisoners' rights lawsuits are being heard), at the White House, US Congress, State Legislatures, Governors' Mansions and other symbols of class rule and prisoner oppression.

3. Writing press releases and holding news conferences for the Black, alternative and radical news media (and sometimes the Capitalist news media) appearing on television and radio news and/or talk shows to discuss prisons. Priority should also be given to starting a Prisoners' newsletter or newspaper with an Anarchist focus. In fact, the old *Black Flag*, formerly the organ of the anarchist Black Cross Group in London, England (which has stopped publishing), should be started up again. (I remember what the HAPOTOC newsletter and the *Black Flag* did to publicize and politicize my case when I was in prison.)

4. Securing Anarchist and other revolutionary materials for prisoners to read, and fight for their right to receive this literature if prison officials try to ban or prohibit such literature for any reason.

5. Sending the prison officials and other State/Class authorities all over the continent a flood of telegrams, letters and petitions about the mistreatment of prisoners, and especially political prisoners and prison activists (who are 'dangerous' in the eyes of the prison officials). Let them know that there is someone who is watching their every move and that the prisoners are not alone!

6. Organize a telephone brigade to continually call "corrections" and other authorities about the treatment of prisoners. This is especially important if there is an enemy attack upon a political prisoner or an ongoing prison protest.

7. Organize a Legal Defense Fund to raise funds for legal fees and to secure the services of an attorney, where necessary, to assist prisoners with criminal or disciplinary cases growing out of their prison organizing or the harassment by prison officials.

8. Organizing and/or participating in coalitions with poor people's movements, prison support, Black, Women's rights, Gay, Church, Left-wing, and other diverse groups, so as to win them over and to integrate the prison struggle into the general movement for social change in North America.

9. Assist prisoners in getting parole, probation or a pardon by securing them a place to stay, a job, some references or names on a petition demanding their freedom when they become eligible for parole or are seeking executive clemency. It may be necessary to hold demonstrations and other protest actions to compel the release of certain prisoners whom officials are continuing to hold even though they should have been legally released.

10. Organize a Correspondence Committee of people to write to prisoners and find out about prison conditions and to show their solidarity and human concern. Also to write protest letters to prison officials, politicians, the news media, prison support groups, professional or legal organizations and other persons, about prison conditions. Also have the ABC's to function as an Observer Committee to go into the prisons, visit the prisoners, investigate their complaints, question the officials and monitor the prison for violation of prisoners' rights.

11. Work against the death penalty and expose it as an instrument of racial genocide and class and political repression. Never forget the Haymarket martyrs, Sacco and Vanzetti, and so many others put to death "legally" by the State, as well as those like Mumia Abu-Jamal, who have been sentenced to death.

12. Expose the fallacy of the Capitalist system of cops, laws and prisons being for the protection of society or as a social necessity. We should hold community forums on crime, the prison system, racism and Capitalism, to expose the system itself as the crime, and to show that there is another way to social peace and harmony: the Anarchist way.

13. Set up Black Cross Amnesty Committees all over the Continent to demand the freedom and amnesty of political/class war prisoners, and the abolition of prisons. Especially demand the immediate release of prisoners who have served unnecessarily lengthy sentences.

14. Demand the immediate closing of all Control Units in federal and state prisons. We should have mass marches at the prisons, in front of politicians offices, and at the "corrections" offices. We should make the issue of Control Units in North American prisons an international human rights issue, and in addition work to try to free all such prisoners on a strict timetable.

15. Those outside the prison support movement (and especially in underground units) must be willing to engage in armed support actions. Where the lives of political/class war prisoners are in immediate jeopardy, they must be forcibly liberated. This is an extreme measure for extreme conditions of repression. It cannot be taken lightly and without full understanding of the consequences. But because of the State's bloody war against innocent victims, it must be considered and done.

Policy

We have to be non-sectarian when it comes to fighting for the rights and freedom of the victims of prison state slavery. Our policy must be that we will work with and for any prisoner and prison support group, if they will work in sincerity and unity with us. We do this so as to obtain the widest possible mobilization on the part of the people in support of the prison movement and the cases of political/class war prisoners. However, we will not subordinate our ideals and identity as anti-authoritarians and Anarchists to any other struggle or group. And we will not sustain attacks or make apologies for our beliefs in a Libertarian world, rather than a State Socialist or Western Imperialist one. We won't moderate our struggle or still our tongues concerning any injustice we see anywhere, in order to accommodate anyone, friend or foe.

Conclusion

The American State in the past has murdered and imprisoned far too many of our Anarchist comrades: Alexander Berkman, the Haymarket martyrs, IWW members (such as Joe Hill), Sacco and Vanzetti, Martin Sostre, Carl Harp and so many others. Also many Anarchist prisoners are in prison today such as Ojore N. Lutalo, Shaka Shakur, along with other political prisoners like those in the Black Liberation Army or formerly with Black Panther Party, like Herman Bell, Sundiata Acoli, and Marshal Eddie Conway. We must organize to ensure that these comrades (and others now in prison) are freed and that further repression of our movement by State/Class rulers is prevented.

Therefore, we must talk about making the Anarchist Black Cross into a mass movement against State repression, one which can counter the drive of the State Capitalists towards a police state, along with our work in the anti-prison struggle. We cannot free any of the prisoners without building a mass movement which links up with all those in favor of democratic rights. That is why I said we cannot engage in sectarian politics. The case of Martin Sostre in the 1970s, who although an Anarchist, did not refuse the aid of Liberals, Communists, Christians, Muslims or anyone else who believed in the injustice of his frame-up conviction, should be a perfect example. The only reason he was freed was because of a mass ferment and agitation by a large sector of the population demanding his release. The governor of New York granted his pardon. It is political suicide for a political prisoner, and the movement which supports him or her, to take a sectarian position and refuse to work with others, even though we may vehemently disagree with them on a whole host of other issues. This is a matter of life and death, where the usual rules do not apply. The only issue here is the freedom of the prisoner. We have to work with all other political prisoner committees who will work with us.

This is not 1979, the time when I first wrote this pamphlet. There was no real ABC movement in North America like there is now. There may be fifty ABC units now worldwide. We must unite them into a powerful tendency, with its own press, political orientation and agenda. I hope we can formalize the group, while not necessarily centralizing the movement. We need to build an ABC Federation of groups so that we can raze the prisons and free all class war prisoners. We can build a powerful international revolutionary prison movement, since we now have activists in many countries which agree with the ABC. Many others would join with us, if they can find out what we are doing.

The ABC Network must strike out on its own at this stage, since there is no consensus among Anarchists about prisoner support generally, and revolutionary political prisoners specifically. No one else will take up this fight in either the Left or the Anarchist movements, and the inside prison movement cannot be effective without the outside active support. The ABC's must join with the Black Cat Collective of the Black Panther movement, and with other political prisoner movements to make a mass coalition. I propose the convening of an ABC conference to unite the ABC's and discuss the building of a mass political prisoner defense movement. It will have to be a large conference to gather the forces needed to make this a real thing. This conference also should include the other movements as both observers and participants. Some of these groups are political prisoner defense committees and have been working on the cases of political prisoners for many years, such as those for Geronimo Pratt, Sundiata Acoli and other political prisoners. They have been very isolated and with few resources. But there are also groups like the Communist party-dominated National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, which for years has had a questionable reputation in its dealings and with its tepid support of political prisoners, though it has tremendous resources to bear, legal and financial. Either they must support the liberation of prisoners in a real way or be exposed in the most ruthless fashion. We can no longer harbor sell-out or opportunist groups in this struggle.

We can build this revolutionary ABC movement if we will but commit ourselves to both prisoners and the movement outside. There is much to do. This is no cakewalk and is very serious. But the alternative of doing nothing is even more dangerous: more will suffer and die. Let us make a difference with a powerful Anarchist Black Cross Network.

We shall have our freedom, or we will level the Earth in our attempts to gain it!!

‘Prison Abolition’ in a Neo-colonial Ice Age

Claustrophobia Collective
1997

Introduction

With the publication of our *Discussion Bulletin*, we had hoped to draw out some real strategic discussion regarding the position that all of us who make up the anarchist prison solidarity tendency find ourselves in. So far, very little of that has happened, and as a result, our politics and work have suffered. We’ve been able to do some good work in building up an Emergency Response Network and various local campaigns, but ABC still lacks the political clarity we’ll need to figure out how to relate to anything broader than ourselves. This paper will attempt to congeal the discussions that we, and other groups in similar positions, have been trying to deal with into a solid form that can be discussed and responded to, and that we hope will move our dialogue in a more productive and strategically useful direction. Many of the issues which we’ve dealt with extensively in the past — the essentially rhetorical disagreements over prison abolition are a good example — seem to be limiting, unnecessarily divisive, and unable to provide us with any real strategic orientation. Those issues may prove to be important at some point, but we’re not going to try to address them here. On the other hand, the definition of our orientation between solely PP/POW support and solidarity with the broader prison movement is an important question that will have to be answered through our experience and practice. To the extent we’ve articulated a position — either dividing the two conceptions or combining them — it’s been done very mechanically, and without a clear orientation of how the question fits into the process of building revolutionary movements. Comments from political prisoners on this point (especially Bill Dunne’s and Shaka Shakur’s letters, which have been printed in past issues of this *Bulletin*) have been extremely helpful as a starting point. We’ll try to add some comments to that discussion, while keeping in mind that the only answers possible are those that flow directly from experience and form part of our overall analysis and strategy.

The bulk of this essay is a direct analysis and self-criticism drawn from our histories in Claustrophobia ABC and Baltimore ABC. However, the analysis we want to make can’t be worked out in a vacuum without discussing the broader currents, movements, and cultures we exist in. Specifically, we feel that a clear assessment of the current state of the anarchist and radical movements we’re a part of, an analysis of the recent history of north american anti-imperialist and solidarity movements, and an overall sketch of the economic and political situation of the country today are necessary in order to inform our work. Each of these is much larger than the scope of this essay, yet on some points we can’t avoid dealing with these questions. When we’ve had to offer our perspective on situations external to us, we’ve tried to do so as clearly and minimally as possible. However, much of this history has never been given a satisfactory treatment, and of course we don’t expect to be able to do this. We apologize in advance to anyone whose positions we may misrepresent and hope that errors will be pointed out to us.

I: Revolution is the expression of communities, classes, and nations which understand they can live without patriarchy, capitalism, and in our case, parasitic dependency, and who build up the power to overthrow the state in order to make that life real. We need to evaluate our own practice relative to this understanding. Too often we’ve shown that we just don’t get it. When we carry out politics without our self-defined social base in motion, but instead as individual activists fighting for some cause or another, we imitate the liberals and will only ever be reformist. There’s a real difference between doing issue-based activism and acting as a conscious organized force within a mass movement. If we don’t organize ourselves, the anarchist movement, into a new class

force, where our movement becomes the expression, the life of a class in revolt, then we will be without consequence. But it must be clear we don't look for the class in revolt, we look for the revolts in our class and that way build movement among our people. We must become that class in revolt. No matter how important it may seem sometimes to debate by-laws, federation structures, etc., we don't feel that structures and organizations are the crucial questions right now. We're far enough from a revolutionary situation in this country right now that basically we have to understand all of our organizations and networks as being provisional; that the main purpose of being organized today is to be building solid relationships, to be developing our political understanding and creating new philosophies of resistance, and to be learning skills and habits which we'll need to carry out revolutionary struggle — everything from running successful counter-institutions to self-defense training and security precautions to living non-authoritarian and non-parasitic relationships in our everyday lives. What that means is that the way we organize today doesn't have to be the way we organize ten or fifteen years from now: the nature of oppression is changing radically, the nature of resistance is and will have to change to counter it, and we need continually to reposition ourselves based on all those factors.

Look for example at the churches burning across the country, which have everyone confused, because it's obviously a full-scale assault on a major institution in the Black community, and yet except for a few Klansmen involved here and there, there are none of the recognizable signs of a *racist conspiracy* that we would expect. The state's strategy in response appears to be to offer just enough support to the southern Black clergy to be able to set the terms of debate, then use that position to keep ahead of any radical grassroots mobilization against the real bases of white supremacist organizing. Still, it's not hard at all to imagine a radical Black or mixed movement rising to defend the communities under attack, and when that happens, sooner or later it will have to confront the state. Are we going to be in a position to be there when it happens? What kind of support can we offer in that kind of situation, and how prepared are we? This is an especially clear example because of our relationship with the Anti-Racist Action (ARA) network and other similar work being done on the issue. If and when political conflict — whatever issue it surfaces around — again reaches the point where large numbers of people are beginning to think seriously about armed struggle, there will definitely be an even greater need for a lot of people to take up political prisoner defense work. But that doesn't have to be in the form of ABC, it probably won't be using the same tactics we're focusing on today, and we might not necessarily be the people best situated to do it.

II: The first thing to look at is the state of the anarchist movement, which for most of us is both our roots and our base. There have been plenty of criticisms made of the arrogance of the movement and white chauvinism, middle-class dominance and pacifist lifestylism. The strongest of these have come from Black comrades, but similar struggles have come up [internally] as well. Much less clear have been the criticisms of the movement's patriarchy, though it's obvious that in most places, the scene is pretty thoroughly male-dominated. Much of the recent anarchist women's developments that contain at least an implicit critique of the male-oriented movement have happened in the specifically cultural realm, without any representation in the form of organizations or position papers — hence it's been that much easier to dismiss them. We would mark the rise of our tendency in the generation of youth, many of them punks, who were inspired by the commitment to direct action and the image of a multi-faceted 'dual power' movement — both community-building and offensive militance against the state — they saw in the European autonomen and squatter movements and tried to reproduce those scenes here. They distinguished themselves, first of all, from the pacifist anarchists that were active in the anti-nuclear struggles, as well as the pacifism of the Central America solidarity movement in which they were active. However, by the end of the '80s, the context in which anarchist direct action had been carried out — the mass actions in solidarity with Central American and South African liberation struggles —

had evaporated. Likewise, the punk scene as the dominant social base for this new youth movement was changing, taking on a less antagonistic, less rebellious ethic. Of course, both these changes have their roots in deeper transformations that were reshaping the whole world.

A number of people who'd done a few years in this period retired when it became clear that new ideas needed to be developed, that the old ones could no longer succeed. But the younger comrades stuck around, having built a network around the Love and Rage newspaper, and a general political unity. L&R was important in that period because it developed connections between those who wanted a revolutionary anarchism that fought against racism, sexism, and homophobia and was in solidarity with anti-imperial struggles around the world. The split which came at the winter 1993 conference in San Diego broke down the unity of this tendency. A number of important issues were the source of the split, each of these influencing the forms taken up next. These issues included charges of internal hierarchies and male-dominance, being directed at those who wanted to remake L&R into a cadre-type group. From activity generated around the Gulf War and the splintering of L&R, a new terrain emerged. Two of the first ABC groups in the new period — Nightcrawlers and New Jersey — were in L&R at this time. Nightcrawlers went with the splitters, while NJ stayed and has maintained a pretty marginal position in the new L&R Federation. Since then, other ABCs (with the exception of Minneapolis and BCAC) have had little interaction with L&R. Thus ABC has created its own independent pole of activity in the diffused and disconnected anarchist movement. A series of infoshops, another tactic taken from the European experience, have defined much of this new period in which the current ABC also arose. Within a few years there were infoshops/autonomous zones in almost any city with some anarchist scene. Starting with a gathering at the Detroit Trumbullplex in May 1994, another pole was developed around the infoshop scene, with (Dis)connection as its medium for discussion. Similarly, an independent pole has developed around Anti-Racist Action groups. This aspect of the current movement — where work is carried on around individual issues, without connection to a broader dialogue in the revolutionary anarchist movement, needs to be changed. The isolationist style we have taken in our issue politics, including the creation of organizational structures, has led to a lack of revolutionary strategy and orientation in our work. Discussions have been developing around several poles recently; we see the dialogue going on among ABC collectives as a parallel, rather than oppositional, development to, for example, L&R or the Network of Anarchist Collectives.

III: It was out of the apparent vacuum of strategy in the early '90s, and motivated by contact with anarchist and other comrades who were still imprisoned for their involvement in the armed struggle of the '70s and '80s, that the current Anarchist Black Cross network began to take shape. We hoped to learn some lessons from connecting our struggle with the revolutionary movements of the recent past and the political prisoners who took part in those movements. We did learn a lot which we can begin to pass on to other people in our situation. We also found ourselves falling into a lot of neocolonial traps through the alliances we thought we could make, and we isolated ourselves to a degree from the people we most needed to reach by failing to keep our focus on organizing ourselves into a revolutionary force. This paper is an attempt to draw out the important lessons from our experience, and to provide a constructive criticism of our mistakes: to lay out some additional groundwork for north american anti-authoritarians like ourselves who are active in the anti-prison movement, so that we can begin to shift our weight off the backs of the people who are holding us now and onto a foundation of our own.

The main impetus for most of the collectives that came together over the last few years within the anarchist prison solidarity movement can be traced to Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin: his speaking tours, his book, and his *Draft Proposal for an Anarchist Black Cross Network* were what immediately led us to take the situation of political prisoners seriously as a strategic issue to focus on. The Claustrophobia collective, as one example, came together after setting up a speaking date

for Kom'boa three years ago and discussing the Draft Proposal with each other afterward. We saw ABC and prison work as a chance to get involved with serious work. In this sense, it was a positive step — a conscious break with a largely hopeless subcultural scene — though of course it had within it several serious contradictions as well. It was definitely Kom'boa's involvement, as much as our own political understanding, that motivated us at the time. First of all, he was a Black revolutionary with an intense history of struggle and a wealth of energy and knowledge who (from our perspective at the time) consciously sought out our movement (i.e. the mostly white and seriously flawed anarchist scene we were a part of) and dealt with us with a lot more patience than someone from his position could have been expected to show. Secondly, his involvement legitimized us for a while in that we could appear that much more serious in our political difference with other white leftists. Both of these facts were important to us at the time, given our general lack of political development. This is where we should make clear that the way we chose to struggle against our racism and classism — by turning our backs on the only communities in which we had real roots and using our relationship to Black comrades to give us political legitimacy — contained plenty of obvious contradictions that were expressed from the beginning. However, it wasn't until we had overcome at least some of our lack of political development that we became fully aware of more complex contradictions we were promulgating.

As the ABC began building various relationships in support of political prisoners whose movements we had no clear relationship to, and as we took up activism in the broader prison movement following the principles and programs of the Draft Proposal, we worked ourselves into a confused and unworkable position. For the most part, we had not developed a political analysis or strategic orientation of our own concerning PP/POW work or any of the specific struggles which made up the prison movement. This was a natural outcome of coming from the anarchist movement, which is fragmented, has a limited social base, and has an underdeveloped political-strategic dialogue. What these facts added up to was the development of a politically dependent and parasitic relationship to the New Afrikan/Black movement, which is the core of and the driving force behind the prison movement. This parasitism can be characterized as a buyer-seller relationship in which we take the news, understanding, and terminology which legitimate us from the New Afrikan prison revolutionaries we're in contact with, and offer material and technical — rather than political — support in return. This amounts to buying politics rather than struggling them out. It also has to be understood as an ultimately useless and even harmful form of internationalism. There are a number of examples from the past few years which can help clarify this. All of those issues are pretty evident just from looking at an issue of Claustrophobia. The first thing you notice is that it has adopted much of the language of the New Afrikan struggle. Our readership among prisoners was almost completely New Afrikan/Black radicals. A not insignificant number of people wrote to us assuming that we were Black ourselves and actively working in Black communities outside prison. Of course there was nothing in Claustrophobia to contradict such a conclusion. While in some ways the journal is moving in a lot of positive directions, there still is no unified analysis of the role prisons play in the state's strategies for control, repression, and genocide, barely even any mention of the relationship of the state to gender struggles now, and not even a word — although we have been starting to think about this — about what role a young, inexperienced movement without clear politics can play in opposing the genocide going on around us.

Histories and Snapshots

Free Mumia! Coalition

The campaign to free Mumia has been a major part of anarchist prison work since at least early 1995. In DC, Claustrophobia did more towards Mumia's defense than we did for any other project we have been involved with. Because it has been similarly central to many other collectives, and because it is a major part (probably the most visible part) of the current prison movement, we will share our perspective on our experience in this struggle. Early in 1995, a group of activists who had been involved in Mumia's defense campaign started to get together to plan for what was then clearly an impending death warrant. This all-white group of activists came from a variety of left groups in DC. The group solidified as the DC Coalition to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal shortly before the death warrant was signed on June 2. Though the membership of the group shifted around a little bit, its basic character remained the same. It had its base in the mostly white and well confined leftist groups in the city. This was the case despite the committed and constant participation of the several Black/New Afrikan members of the coalition. Due to the looming execution date, the basic tactic at this time was frequent broadly directed public actions such as marches, street flyering and postering, car caravans and public forums. These actions were done as broadcast calls for solidarity, directed more or less at anyone we thought might listen. We spoke from an undefined place, or rather from no place at all; we did not speak as middle class white liberals, nor as communist cadre, nor as a working class community group, nor as New Afrikan or Black nationalists, nor as anti-racist white feminists nor as a coalition of any of these voices; and thus it was hard for anyone to know how to hear us. Most of our actions were directed at the working class Black neighborhoods where we lived or close by. In a pretty anonymous and ghostly way we traversed the streets posting flyers for our next demonstration. We wanted masses of people out to terrify the state. Some of us wanted to propagate the principle that if Mumia dies, there will be fire in the skies!, seeing this as perhaps the only real power that could intercede. So we put this out as well.

The reality of it was, however, that only the network of people connected to various small left groups came out, and our marches passed through the streets in the middle of the day with an equally phantasmic presence, never really touching the ground, or at least not the same ground that everyone else was walking on. The most obscene example of the coalition's impossible presence was our "car caravan" which consisted of driving a bunch of cars decked out with signs and a van with a loudspeaker through a dozen neighborhoods on a Saturday morning. As the caravan passed slowly down the street or stopped at a busy spot, someone on the mic would put out the word on Mumia, usually by way of slogans, and other people would walk nearby passing out flyers. Whether or not this could be done without giving the impression that we were a strange cult about to take over the city is not our issue here. In any case we proved we were not the ones to do it when we drove down the street in a Latino neighborhood invoking the name of a man whose shooting by the police had brought riots a few years before. People definitely took notice as a group of mostly white non-Latinos blared across a loudspeaker "in the name of Daniel Gomez, Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!" What did we know about the situation, and why was it so easy for us to opportunistically invoke someone else's struggle? The same tactic, different names was used in other neighborhoods recalling well known Black victims of police brutality. Of course it is important and totally necessary to make links to local situations, but then how come it didn't work? Cause no one bought it from us. And no one bought it from us because we were phantoms who had no real relation to those we spoke to, and were not clear about who we were.

This was not primarily a question of the "racial" make-up of the coalition, but how we organized. During this period leading up to the execution date and stay, we were aware of some of the problems with our strategy, and afterwards we attempted to address them. Starting that fall, we attempted to orient to various segments of the population that were already constituted in some type of organization: unions, churches, schools, etc. and to connect with people who would carry out work within their different communities or scenes. This idea made better sense, but was

coupled with previous "rouse the masses" strategies, and did not arise out of much of a strategic dialogue. As a result, it never got implemented. More recently, a New Afrikan member of the coalition made the suggestion that white folks in the coalition would do better to figure out how we could get whites to support Mumia's freedom, while Blacks/New Afrikans worked in their own community. This principle was never discussed among the whole coalition because of the group's chronic inability to struggle over politics and strategy. However, it was de facto put into practice in ambiguous form through an alliance with the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. In the 'White Quarter,' this strategy might have led to the development of a base among groups of whites around politics associated with Mumia's struggle. The particulars of this would need to be worked out in the process. On the other hand, the strategy could also lead white members of the coalition back into the familiar territory of middle class left activism that is the white left's substitute for struggle. What choice white members of the coalition made is unknown to us, since we moved out of town in the middle of these changes and have not been in close contact since. At the time that this change was going on, Claustrophobia was becoming somewhat more aware of the former possibility at the same time that we were totally frustrated with the group and uncertain about how to participate in it.

Friends of the Marshall Eddie Conway Support Committee

During the winter of '96, a campaign was built in support of wrongly convicted Baltimore Black Panther veteran Marshall Eddie Conway, which we involved ourselves in on an individual level (by that point splits in the Baltimore ABC collective were already solidly manifesting themselves and work as a collective was basically impossible). The campaign was basically built around a core support committee consisting of fellow BPP veterans and other radicals in the local Black community, with a broader coalition which, despite some honest efforts to get beyond sectarianism, never managed to escape the "white left ghetto" which swallowed it almost immediately, and within a few months, the coalition fell apart as weightlessly and quietly as it was built up. This experience should force us to take a deeper look at the role we expected to play in this type of coalition and ask what went wrong...The timing of the campaign was based on a chance to gain a commutation of sentence from the governor, and the fertile ground shown by the "Free Mumia" campaign for organizing college and high-school students — of all colors and nationalities — behind support for a radical political prisoner, and especially one affiliated with the BPP. At some point it became obvious that our generation was starting to identify with the Panthers to the degree that thousands of people could be mobilized real easily for a demonstration, and a number of Black radicals here decided to try and mobilize that sentiment into sympathy with Eddie Conway's case, with the goal of maintaining some street-level awareness and outreach to accompany a proposal to the governor's office for parole or commutation of Eddie's sentence. For our part, we welcomed the campaign as a chance to bring some of the issues raised by support work for Mumia down to a local level and teach our generation of radicals that the resistance of the 60s/70s was something happening everywhere, here, and not something which can be abstracted to one hero. Also, we had watched all efforts to build a support coalition for Mumia in Baltimore fall apart due to the sectarianism and incompetence of all the essentially white left groups involved (ourselves not excepted), and we hoped that a support campaign which was Black-led and directly and locally in touch with the prisoner it focused on could avoid all these problems.

Starting out into this campaign, we came from a position that our focus should always be on using this case to deal with the role of prisons in society today, and to raise the issues that building a movement entails: security, defense of comrades, strategy for dealing with state repression, etc. This might not have ever been consciously stated, but it was pretty much implicit in

the directions we were starting to move. We knew that the Panthers were long dead as a political force, however much inspiration their example may still provide. There was no revolutionary organization for Eddie to join and build if he was released, and we didn't see supporting him as necessarily being supporting the Black revolutionary movement. What we were hoping to do was to get a bunch of younger activists to start talking with each other about the analysis of prisons as a central part of the state's strategy for repression and genocide in the 90s, and to start looking seriously at the lessons of the 60s/70s movements and what they mean for us if we're serious about building a comparable movement in our generation. Of course, we felt a moral obligation to support Eddie and all the other political prisoners who have basically been left to rot in prison as the movement died, but we never wanted that to be our primary attitude in organizing. You can't get very far trying to organize if you're always looking backward.

The politics of the coalition were somewhat vague as far as the alliances it made. Due primarily to Eddie's input, there was a strong link to a prisoners' initiative against recent legislation denying parole for lifers. At the same time, since the overall strategy was always a petition to the governor, the coalition always shrank from the prospect of taking too militant a stand on issues which might have won it broader grassroots support. Demonstrations were arranged with the police and the coalition never took any kind of anti-cop stand. The group always stayed comfortably within the liberal/left scene and never reached out to more militant Black groups. This position seemed to be a source of conflict within the core support committee, although the positions were never clarified to the coalition. A similar criticism was made at one point that Eddie had played only minor roles in the most important and militant prison struggles since his incarceration, and that holding him up as a political prisoner and a symbol of the prison movement was in effect taking an unprincipled stand in relation to the people who had fought and suffered for those struggles, especially the group of Sunni Muslims who had been the core of a number of struggles over the years. For most of us in the coalition, there was really no way to work out all the facts behind criticisms like this, so what should have been important was to keep clear politics at the forefront of who we were and what our relationship to Eddie's freedom campaign should be. Unfortunately, no one in the coalition had taken the time to work those issues out from the start, since all the groups involved were essentially operating from a dishonest viewpoint: thinking that we could simply follow the support committee's line and be absolved of the responsibility of figuring shit out for ourselves. What we should have done in this coalition was to put all of our energy into building solid relationships based on politics with the other people from our generation in the coalition. Since that was never done, there was never anything we could do productively in the group and we ended up essentially as observers the whole time. And now out of 30–40 people who were attending meetings at first, basically nothing remains as far as regular activity.

The Split in the ABC Federation

When groups were first discussing the idea of getting together in the federation to coordinate political prisoner support work better, there were all along two conceptions of what this would mean. On one hand, there was the strategy of building a new movement around the PP/POWs of the last wave, expressed by the program of making financial support to PP/POWs central and using the education of their histories as outreach to lay the groundwork for building a new movement. *And on our side, we saw ourselves as part of a new emerging movement that was going to have to define itself on its own terms, independent of both the 70s/80s left and the orthodox anarchist tradition alike. So we saw our primary responsibility as being toward that movement, to participate in it and help it shape itself.* Our work with political prisoners was seen in the context of (1) making links between "outside" and "inside" revolutionary movements, (2)

using the experiences of longtime revolutionaries to help us critique our current work, and (3) finally, fulfilling a moral duty that every movement has towards its PP/POWs. This is still essentially how we define our politics, and we're still searching for solutions to put that into practice. The situation after the federation split, with two or more separate networks doing similar and interconnected work with little cooperation and less political dialogue, doesn't bode well. *We need to work out the political basis for unity we have, then act on that...*

Strategic Suggestions

"Revolution is about finding a way, or making one"
— Gregory Hunt

Towards Political Solidarity

One of the issues raised in the last section that we need to clarify is what we mean by *political support* rather than support which is just technical and material. At the end, we raised some questions that are important for us to investigate. As well there are many others: we haven't seen much analysis of "crime" in white communities; of different settler class relations to law and order hysteria; of the mechanism by which law and order politics get spread. These and many other questions are important for us if we are to combat the genocide and neoliberalism of prisons. Helping to deepen the analysis of the prison movement as well as other revolutionary struggles, and contributing to an understanding of how to win is what we mean by political support. Developing politics with strategy and tactics that arise from our own analysis of the situation and an understanding of our place in that situation, is both more difficult and more useful than the reproduction and propagation of politics, no matter how advanced, which are not our own. Of course, the theory of the New Afrikan/Black movement which we borrow comes out of the struggles of New Afrikan/Black revolutionaries to understand the reality they are moving in. We need to do this for ourselves. We also need to move our analysis into strategic ideas of intervention from which an even more profound struggle can occur. From here, we go into some ideas for a strategic reorientation. There are a number of questions for research which could point us in this direction. One obvious one is a more thorough analysis of patriarchy and how the struggle against it can be effectively tied into our work. Within the context of the new patriarchal attacks on women, such as cuts in welfare, what is the meaning of the rapid rise in imprisonment of women? How does it fit in to everything else? What part does it play in genocide against Blacks/New Africans? What is the demographics in terms of nation? Where are "white" women in relation to this? How does a male-focused prison movement deal with this? And as always, more work in "cultural" circles would help us out a lot. It always seems like people's problems and frustrations get expressed through their lifestyles, their music, & everyday rebellion long before the so-called "left" picks up on them, and much more honestly than the left deals with them.

Neoliberalism/Neocolonialism: Understanding the World We Struggle

In order to develop politics relating to prison we need to have a better understanding of the whole deal. We need to be watching the whole world. That needs to be the basis for how we take action. We are not going to try to begin that analysis here but we want that to become a bigger part of how we understand what we are doing We are interested in the politics that the EZLN has been advancing and the possibility of an international coming up around them. The idea of a new international ("against neoliberalism and for humanity") was first put out this summer at the intercontinental encounter held in Chiapas. The idea excites us as well because it breaks from the

model of solidarity groups that have been generated world wide in support of the Zapatistas, or at least it could and we hope it does. The Zapatistas have started from an analysis that is in part new but more importantly they are part of a world liberation struggle that has acknowledged the new terrain (known as neoliberalism or neo-colonialism) and is attempting to find a way out. We are not trying to argue that the EZLN have made the most advanced analysis or the strongest blow against this revised capitalist system which rules the world, and so everyone needs to fall in behind their lead. In fact, there are a number of questions and criticisms that we have. So we are not so much interested in a Zapatista international so much as an international in which new and anti-authoritarian forms of struggle can be carried out (including that of the Zapatistas), that these struggles be linked and that they be self-conscious of the new possibilities they embody. What we need in order to participate in this "network without hierarchies" which is still only an idea, is a much clearer idea of our own politics and perspective/analysis. Of course there is also a question of how we would participate: representing prison struggles or as a political tendency or whatever we might come to be by next fall. That is all up in the air.

Anti-Racist Action

Having taken a trip this fall out to the midwest (Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis), we got to check out the Anti-Racist Action movement which is growing pretty fast, especially compared to anything else with anti-authoritarian politics. Mostly we hung out with the ARA crew in Minneapolis, which is the basis for our perspective. We want to propose ARA's methods of struggle as a model in many ways for our own activities. So first let us describe briefly what interests us about ARA. It is interesting, first of all, that ARA which started in Toronto and Minneapolis grew out of a radical or leftist type skinhead scene. In the first years of ARA, all members were anti-racist skinheads (and not "pro-american" either) whose practice consisted of beating up nazi skins in those cities. It was a totally principled and sensible response to anti-racist ideas to fight those racists who were in your own scene, who were attempting to take over your own identity for nazi organizing. For this reason we disagree with Komboa's characterization and dismissal of the ARA groups as "vanguards fighting vanguards". ARA has placed itself within the currents of white youth culture in an effort to fight nazi organizers who are trying to organize in the same place. At the same time, ARA groups in many places have taken on struggles against institutional racism by taking action against police. The original skinhead ARA groups have since fallen apart with only a few of the original people still involved. Sexism and macho-man style broke up the group as well as alienating others from it. Now ARA has little connection to skinhead culture, but it continues to build anti-racist (and revolutionary anti-sexist, anti-authoritarian) politics within a number of mostly white youth scenes.

While we were in Mpls a lot of work was being done in the metal scene, largely in response to a shift by nazi boneheads towards that scene. Within a pretty short period of time a lot of contact had been made within the metal scene where a number of bands formed a bloc identifying themselves as anti-racist and were planning to start a label for anti-racist bands. At the same time other bands were moving more clearly into the nazi camp (orchestrated by the St Paul bonehead band Bound for Glory). The polarization of a pretty apolitical scene around politics of anti-racism is a really positive development. It causes a fracture of white solidarity, and promotes a unity based on radical politics. In a less developed part of their work, ARA has begun to organize white kids against the police. This has almost completely taken the form of copwatch actions, which are street patrols in a neighborhood where cop actions are scrutinized by a big group of people. The aim is to get cops to let people go by making everything they do a big hassle for them and more importantly to develop an attitude, among white youth and within whatever neighborhood ARA patrols in, that is critical and hostile to the police. What interests us in all of

this is the possibility that is latent in ARA work of developing an (anti)white youth culture that is anti-racist and against the police, and that these politics are given active and practical expression through the culture that they create. We haven't mentioned the anti-patriarchal work that ARA has begun to do (a queer kiss-in outside the house of two gay-bashers). This work has been even less developed than the anti-cop activity though it is growing fast and, due to women's strong presence in the Mpls ARA, it serious part of the ARA scene there. All of these transformations, if built into a way of life (a culture), constitute a base for revolutionary struggle which hasn't existed among too many white kids for several decades.

If ABC is to concern itself with the issue of prison as an increasingly powerful tool of social control in the context of global capitalist restructuring, then we must find a strategy and tactics which can meaningfully intervene. As we see it, the most profound development we could affect would be to find a path that could take masses of (anti)white youth into rebellion against law and prisons. And if this does become our strategy then much of our work would cross paths with that of at least the more radical and anarchist ARA groups. It would definitely be more difficult to apply with the same success ARA methods to ABC work. For example, the proximity of racists in skinhead and metal scenes is not paralleled by any white youth connection to prisons. There is nothing like the everyday threat of getting stomped by nazis cause you are anti-racist or anarchist. Prison is even more distant (and abstract) than the police as something to fight against. There are white kids in prison, of course, and maybe that's a place to start, but it seems so much more distant culturally. The reality of prisons are not so easily injected into the everyday terrain of white youth (that is, short of mass imprisonment of white youth). What we need to do is figure out at least the beginning of an "anti-prison practice" that people could take up.

Race Treason and White Prisoners

Speaking of Nazis, we all know that one of the places they do their most serious organizing is in the prisons. The recent string of killings at Lewisburg federal pen got started by some boneheads murdering an anti-racist white prisoner who got involved with a group of Sunni Muslims. This is a case where all of our beliefs about "race treason" get seriously put to the test. This is a man who was killed by white supremacists for just that — daring to break with the lie of "whiteness". One major responsibility we have as "free world" whites is to make contacts with people like that and figure out how we can support and defend them. We can't afford any more dead anti-racists...

In an article called "Back from Hell: Black Power and Treason to Whiteness Inside Prison Walls" (printed in *Race Traitor #3*), Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin described the prisoners' struggle at Terre Haute federal penitentiary in 1970 in which "even whites who had been following the Klan line for many years rose up with the blacks against the prison officials". He described a situation where a number of radical white prisoners were able to orient a large number of whites to identifying with, and allying themselves with, the work that the revolutionary Black prisoners were doing at the time. "... it created a new sense of unity among the prisoners as a class. The white prisoners began to check out books from the Black Culture library, to attend joint political study groups, and to try to understand in theoretical terms how racism was a way of enslaving us all — blacks and other non-whites as inferiors, whites as oppressors. Fascist politics became not only unpopular, but unsafe." (We recommend that everyone should find and read this article for the inspiration and history it provides.)

The unity Kom'boa talks about is a model for a first step towards building a revolutionary prison movement. But of course this isn't 1970. The revolutionary Black movement has been decimated by state repression and reforms, and is just now seriously consolidating and rebuilding itself; and from our experience, radical white prisoners seem alone and isolated most places.

Obviously as outside activists, we can't do much real organizing in prisons, but it's important to identify what's going on, and where and who we should be focusing on supporting. Our free literature project is a good program; it helps basically anyone trying to organize inside the walls. But figuring out a way to specifically work to encourage/support/defend race treason inside prisons is on us.

Statement Concerning the Newly Formed Anarchist Black Cross Network

Written for the 2002 Anarchist Black Cross Network Conference in Texas

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin
2002

Comrades, Brothers & sisters (and Everyone):

Recently, the Anarchist Black Cross Network held its founding conference in Austin, Texas (July 27–29, 2002.) I was in attendance, was a keynote speaker, and spoke to many of the 150 or so delegates at workshops, and different stages of the conference, when it recessed.

So that there is no misunderstanding by anyone, I want to clarify my status in relation to the ABCN. I cannot function as a member of the group at this time, but I do want to service as an organization Mentor, because that is the best way I can help the group. It is also important that I maintain my neutrality around the internal politics of ABC movements generally, and cannot do that as a formal ABCN member. I do not want to see sectarianism become any worse in our movement, or serve as a distraction by folks wanting me to join this or that ABC tendency. The situation in Spain a few years ago let me know just how serious a problem this can become.

Coming in, I made it clear that I was only interested in the creation of a broader based Anarchist Black Cross as a viable movement in the United States, and saw the ABCN as a large part of that. I pointed out that I still supported the entire international ABC movement, even tendencies like the ABC Federation, that the leadership of this ABCN group might be opposed to. In fact, I would like to see a United Prison Front of both ABCN, ABCF, Critical Resistance, and all of the contemporary groups supporting prisoners and fighting racism, as well as Black/POC, women, Queer and other liberation groups, but of course that has to be your decision.

My sentiments have not changed, so only part of the reasons for this letter is to clarify my status. I support the ABC movement now the same as I always have, from back in the day when I was a prisoner myself serving life imprisonment during the 1970s-1980s; but I am interested in ABCN only so far that it carries out its mission in dealing with racism, the mass imprisonment of the poor and peoples of color, as well as supporting prisoners inside generally, with material aid and political support. I believe that is the way to advance Anarchist politics and the prison struggle in this period. This is not the 1970's when there was still a revolutionary movement in this country on the outside, and a mass prison support movement already existed in the prisons and in the streets.

In fact, I remember the original Black Panther Party not only had a Prisoner Commissary Program, but also had buses for transportation in many states to transport family members to the prisons, free legal aid for prisoners, and a prison survival program for those released on parole. So, the ABC-F's War-chest or the proposed Revolutonary Prisoners' Fund are nothing new, but the Panthers understood that the material aid campaign had to be just a part of a political campaign against he prisons and the capitalist state. When George Jackson became Panther Field Marshall, he understood that there had to be a United Front for political Prisoners, and the prison struggle had to be part of a broad front for social change allied with the then unfolding revolutionary struggle of women, Blacks, Xicanos and other groups oppressed by this capitalist society. So material and campaigns themselves are nothing new, and cannot be the reason of the existence of an ABC movement. It must connect with the masses of people.

During the conference, I openly expressed my point of view that since the majority of prisoners in the U.S. prison system are now Black, Brown, Asian or Native American, then this new movement must reflect that fact in both its membership and mission, if it is to have any credibility as something more than yet another white Left tendency running away from these

issues. The idea of a movement made up of white radicals on the outside just charitably helping peoples of color on the inside has always been a source of controversy. The question for me is whether real attempts will be made by this newly formed ABCN to connect with the families and communities of these prisoners of color, as well as poor working class communities generally, and make them a part of the ABC campaign. That will tell me how serious this group is.

For me, I realized that this would require drastic and serious commitment by any ABC movement at the outset to ensure that the organization adopts a new focus. I was disturbed that during the deliberative stage of the conference, nobody even saw the necessity of raising the issue, that is nobody but myself. I expected someone to talk about a People of Color committee to recruit and organize. But no matter, it has been raised, now it must be implemented!

But to be effective: the newly formed People of Color organizing Committee (?) needs to know where it is going, before it can then give guidance to the entire organization. Therefore, I want to make these points:

1. The POC body must be on par with every other deliberative body, and POC must be given a strong voice in all ABCN policies, and not be a mere token effort. The ABCN leadership must be challenged by this POC body to live up to its mission and to make the movement inclusive to all. As for the POC committee itself, it should have a majority of members who actually are POC, but there is no requirement of an absolute majority.

2. The communities of color for the ABCN leadership and membership could be a major base of support. The POC body of ABCN should be a pole of attraction to not only bring peoples of color into the organization, but to insure that they have an equal voice in all matters of substance in the organization. This body should be consulted and made part of any leadership. This recruitment has to be absolutely supported by the entire groups, and not be minimized in importance.

3. Working with the leadership and mass membership of ABCN, which can develop out of the work of the conference, can connect them with a number of oppressed communities in Texas and other states. Clearly the ABCN must not just repeat the work of the ABCF, and its mistakes in ignoring these matters, even if it is critical of other ABCF policies. It must deal with racism and the right-wing offensive of this period itself. The trans of political imprisonment of mass of people, based on race, class, and genocidal terror should be the basis of a new mass movement, not just traditional Anarchist politics.

4. The POC committee is the one body that has to raise the issues of shaping the ABCN organization as an anti-racist movement to challenge the government over its drug war and its mass imprisonment of youth of color. Again, this cannot be minimized or emphasized enough. Frankly, I have always believed that it is a minimal program just to provide for the material needs of prisoners alone, while huge numbers of people are forced into prison and the death chambers. We must deal with the political reasons they are in prison in the first place, and oppose a racist death penalty. Mumia Abu Jamal is just a symbol of the racist death penalty. We must call for an immediate national moratorium on the death penalty. Shaka Sankofa's recent legal murder in Texas should tell us that we must organize in the streets to build a mass movement of poor and working class peoples, or Mumia is ultimately doomed. A movement of white radicals alone is neither desirable nor sustainable.

5. Two million people are in the U.S. prison system today, with a huge number coming from communities of color (50% or more.) The state of Texas incarcerates Blacks at a rate 7

times that of whites and has Chicanos/Mexicanos jailed as high as 20% of the state prison population. Similarly, 40% of the entire Black male and youth population in California is in prison; also 55% of the prison population of Pennsylvania is Black, though only constituting 10% of that state's population. Similar statistics are to be found all over the country showing that racial minorities are incarcerated at a rate of 10–15 times that of whites This is clearly a new racism and a result of fascist social control, but we don't have any evidence that the Anarchist Black Cross movement understands this or is responding in any way to such a reality. It continues to see itself as a support group which has a limited role of sending $20 a month, even though millions are now being incarcerated at an unprecedented rate. We cannot send aid to such a huge number, so we must tackle the root causes.

6. To have any relevance at all, the POC committee must be sure that ABCN leadership raises issues of fighting police brutality, police racial profiling, racist vigilantism, poverty, and other evils, and that they fight this in a revolutionary movement, not as a reformist group afraid to challenge the state on such matters.

7. I think that each on of the ABC chapters should have someone who handles the work of outreach to communities of color, and helps design policies for that chapter. If there is no one working on the local level, then this critical work simply will not be done.

8. The ABCN must fight for prison abolition as a goal, even while it fights for a moratorium on further prison construction and for redistribution of the money stolen from the school systems, hospitals, and other social sectors which have been de-funded to pay for prisons. We must oppose this mass incarceration and theft of money for social spending into prison construction.

9. I think that the ABCN must be willing to become part of mass coalitions around these issues, even while building its own politics and movement. For years, anarchists and their movements have been too white, middle class and self-absorbed, only willing to give lip service about racial justice, class-based unity, and a truly liberatory movement inclusive of all and their demands. Anarchism has been a white rights movement, and this must change. I believe that what we want the ABCN and the entire Anarchist movement to be is a grassroots, multiracial movement for justice. So, for the ABCN, this is both an opportunity as well as a challenge.

In my opinion, it is a good thing that the ABCN has had its founding conference, but that it must now be serious and committed enough to break new ground for the ABC movement. We must popularize Anarchist politics and organizing on a mass scale, so that poor and working class people can relate to it, not just middle class, college trained whites.

I have made constructive criticisms here, but offered them in good faith. In skeleton form, there is also a plan which others can build on. I am not sure if the ABCN leadership or the membership wants me to continue to work with this POC body, if I am not a full member or in response to my critical support. I offer my services nonetheless. you will have to decide what you want to do. I am not personally seeking to lead this movement. I am available for help, but I want to see things done right, and it is not a "given" that they will be. I wish you great success from hereon out, but you must make it real!

Sincerely,
Lorenzo Komboa Ervin

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